



MEMORANDUM

AGENDA ITEM #VII.B

DATE: JUNE 27, 2022
TO: COUNCIL MEMBERS
FROM: STAFF
SUBJECT: CORRESPONDENCE AND ARTICLES

Recommendation

Information only.



South Florida Regional Planning Council
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June 2, 2022

Senator Steve Geller and
Commissioner Beam Furr
South Florida Regional Planning Council
1 Oakwood Boulevard, Suite 250
Hollywood, Florida 33020

Commissioner Cathy Townsend and
Commissioner Doug Smith
Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council
421 SW Camden Avenue
Stuart, Florida 34994

**Dear Regional Planning Council Chairs Senator Geller and Commissioner Townsend,
Commissioner Furr, and Commissioner Smith,**

On behalf of Director Sutton, and Secretary Hamilton, we are grateful for the continued support of the Treasure Coast and South Florida Regional Planning Councils (RPCs) and your working group dedicated to raising awareness and protection of Florida's Coral Reef.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) view restoring and protecting Florida's Coral Reef as a top priority. To highlight some of our on-going efforts and partnerships, our collaborative efforts include the following regional and local initiatives:

National and Regional Initiatives:

1. Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease Response

Since 2017, DEP and FWC, along with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Park Service (NPS), have been co-leading the multi-faceted partner response to stony coral tissue loss disease (SCTLD). This collaborative effort has united reef management, research, and restoration communities in a joint effort to reduce impacts from this globally unprecedented coral disease outbreak. Recently, the Florida SCTLD Outbreak Response Plan was created to guide the team and ensure an efficient and effective response effort. As part of the coral outbreak response, FWC and NOAA Fisheries began the Florida Coral Rescue Team in 2018. This Team has developed and managed the largest land-based gene bank of Caribbean corals in the world, in coordination with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. The Team has collected ~2400 corals of 20 different disease-susceptible species, and these corals are being held and cared for in 26 facilities, with 29 operating partners, in 14 different states. This Team is also overseeing breeding of these rescued corals, most of which have never been bred in land-based facilities before. Currently 11 Rescue species have spawned and produced offspring that have been transplanted back to Florida's Coral Reef for restoration and research purposes.

2. Florida Reef Resilience Program – Resilience Action Plan

Both FWC and DEP participate in the Florida Reef Resilience Program (FRRP), which is a collaborative effort among local, state, and federal environmental managers, scientists, conservation organizations, and reef users to develop resilience-based management strategies for anticipating and addressing climate change and other irritants to Florida's Coral Reef. Following the 2005 severe bleaching event, the FRRP developed the Disturbance Response Monitoring (DRM) program to assess reef condition annually during months of peak thermal stress. Initially led by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), DRM transitioned to being led by FWC in 2018. The program was recently modified to track the spread, severity, and impact of stony coral tissue loss disease. To date, DRM has been funded by TNC, NOAA and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), but relies heavily on partners including DEP to accomplish the surveys needed to apply and be awarded the grants it also depends on every year. In 2021, the FRRP released the Resilience Action Plan for Florida's Coral Reef. Together, these two action plans are created by reef managers to protect and restore Florida's Coral Reef and support private and commercial uses that benefit individuals, communities, our beautiful state and the nation.

3. Florida's Coral Reef Restoration Strategy and Priorities

As Florida's Coral Reef is so economically and ecologically important, it is critical to keep it resilient and healthy; however, pollution, warming ocean temperatures, ocean acidification and many other threats continue to contribute to reef degradation. In addition, SCTL has significantly impacted the populations of more than half of Florida's 45 reef-building coral species, including those listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Government, private, and non-profit entities continue to address environmental stressors impacting the reef, but Florida's coral species are unable to recover without assistance. Without continued bold and aggressive action, we will lose critical functions and benefits of our reef.

To guide resource allocations over the next five years, the FWC and DEP identified priorities critical to ensuring successful restoration of Florida's Coral Reef. Concurrent with the efforts to address local stressors like water quality and harmful algae, we must scale up coral propagation and restoration capacity and infrastructure in order to jumpstart wild coral population recovery. To grow new coral effectively and truly have an impact increasing Florida's Coral Reef, we must do it in innovative ways. Developing a "**coral restoration economy**" will consist of a skilled workforce creating, expanding, and operating water and land-based coral nurseries; transplanting corals to the reef; and maintaining and monitoring restoration sites over the years to come. As the industry grows, voluntourism opportunities can also be developed to ensure residents and visitors to Florida are part of restoring this ecological, cultural, and economical ecosystem.

Alongside these critical efforts, resource managers are developing a large-scale ecosystem restoration strategy to preserve the ecological and structural integrity of Florida's Coral Reef. The plan looks at the entire reef and will identify connected areas that are critical for restoration efforts. Once restored, these connected areas have a higher chance of expediting natural re-population across the reef. This strategy will complement managed area and site-specific restoration plans.

4. Integration with South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force

As ecologically and economically important components of the South Florida ecosystem, Florida's coral reef and associated patch reef, hardbottom, and seagrass resources should be restored, preserved, and protected. The implementation of Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan projects and other region-wide restoration activities may have potentially positive or negative impacts on Florida's Coral Reef and its restoration potential. At the same time, large-scale restoration of Florida's Coral Reef may provide an unparalleled opportunity to enhance the resilience of coastal wetlands and the southern Everglades and protect billions of dollars of state and federal investments in Everglades restoration from future impacts associated with storm surge and sea level rise. Ultimately, the successful restoration of these two national

treasures in the south Florida ecosystem can only be accomplished through focused, formal coordination among local, state, and federal agencies.

Working in coordination with Florida's Chief Resilience Officer, DEP and FWC are jointly proposing the creation of a Florida's Coral Reef Coordination Team as an advisory body to south Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force's Working Group. The proposed mission of this team is to integrate and coordinate management and restoration-related activities to Florida's Coral Reef and associated resources.

5. Restoring Resilient Reefs Act

DEP and FWC are encouraging the swift passage of the Restoring Resilient Reefs Act by Congress. The bill's embrace of cooperative federalism and the establishment of novel funding pathways will stimulate improved coordination and cooperation among federal, state and local stakeholders. This bipartisan, science-based legislation represents the best opportunity to reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000 and reflect modern challenges to promote better management and restoration outcomes that begin to reverse the decline, and enhance the condition and resilience, of U.S. coral reefs. The legislation would allow the state to access additional funds to supplement and accelerate our work to restore Florida's Coral Reef, as well as to empower our partners, including local governments and research institutions, to expand regional capabilities to further address coral reef management concerns and enhance opportunities for restoration success.

Place-Based Management Area Coordination:

1. Unified Coral Benthic Monitoring

Through the Coral Reef Evaluation and Monitoring Project (CREMP), FWC has monitored the condition of coral reef and hardbottom habitats annually throughout the Florida Keys since 1996 and the Dry Tortugas since 2004. In 2003, DEP extended this program to incorporate the northernmost reef along southeast Florida (referred to as SECREMP) through a partnership between FWC, DEP, and Nova Southeastern University. SE/CREMP is one of the longest running coral reef monitoring projects in south Florida and has been important in documenting the changes to Florida's Coral Reef that have occurred in recent years.

2. Southeast Florida Coral Reef Initiative Team and Technical Advisory Committee

In response to the US Coral Reef Task Force's National Action Strategy for Coral Reef Conservation, the Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP) was established within DEP in 2004, and became responsible for managing coral reefs, hardbottom communities, and associated reef resources for the northern third area of Florida's Coral Reef. CRCP has continued to lead mapping, monitoring, and research, build partnerships, conduct education and outreach, and reduce threats to the coral reef ecosystem in Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach, and Martin counties.

The Southeast Florida Coral Reef Initiative (SEFCRI) Team is a 64-member stakeholder group, established in 2003 and coordinated by CRCP, that provides recommendations to the CRCP Manager on the northern third of Florida's coral reef ecosystem. Team leadership positions are called Vice-Chairs, and they are responsible for assisting the CRCP Manager. Team recommendations have taken the form of Local Action Strategy (LAS) projects, which were created by the Team in 2004 and 2017. Per their charter, SEFCRI Team members serve on project teams to assist CRCP staff with the implementation of LAS projects. The SEFCRI Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) is a 25-member committee selected to advise the SEFCRI Team based on their knowledge and/or expertise.

Of the eight SEFCRI Team seats dedicated to state representatives, FWC staff occupy four, including staff from the Division of Marine Fisheries, Division of Habitat and Species Conservation, Division of Law

Enforcement, and the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute. An FWC staff member also serves as the state Vice-Chair. Two FWC staff currently serve as TAC members. Numerous FWC staff have served on project teams and as project advisors over the history of SEFCRI. FWC staff have been vital in the creation and implementation of SEFCRI projects, and lead discussions and responses to questions regarding fishing, fisheries, and boating as they arise from the SEFCRI Team, Vice-Chairs, TAC, project teams, and the general public in attendance at Team and TAC meetings.

3. SEFCRI FDOU Project #52 – Fisheries Stakeholder Committee

One SEFCRI LAS project suggested by an FWC SEFCRI Team member, and supported by the majority of the SEFCRI Team, is to establish a Fisheries Stakeholder Committee to obtain recommended management actions from fishermen, which was identified as a gap in the SEFCRI.

The Fisheries Committee, facilitated by the University of Florida, has been meeting approximately every other month since 2021. They are currently finalizing a survey to obtain fisheries stakeholder's feedback on their draft recommended management actions.

FWC Division of Marine Fisheries staff are on the project team, and they assist with developing the contractor's scope of work, planning the Committee meetings, attending the meetings, and reviewing the contractor's deliverables.

4. SEFCRI FDOU Project #55 – Coral ECA Management Plan

The northern extension of Florida's Coral Reef extends beyond the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Biscayne National Park, approximately 105 linear miles from Miami-Dade County to the St. Lucie Inlet in Martin County. Millions of residents and visitors utilize the reef for commercial and recreational fishing and diving, in addition to education and scientific research. Despite its high economic and ecological value and relation to the most heavily developed and densely populated region of the state, no extensive management plan had been developed.

In 2018, the Florida Legislature, led by former state Representative Kristin Jacobs, designated the area as the Southeast Florida Coral Reef Ecosystem Conservation Area (Coral ECA). Although the bill established the Coral ECA via an unnumbered section of law, the Legislature's Office of Legislative Services subsequently assigned the Coral ECA to s. 253.90, F.S.

Subsequently, the legislature approved the renaming of the Coral ECA after the Kristin Jacobs Coral Reef Ecosystem Conservation Area was established on July 1, 2021.

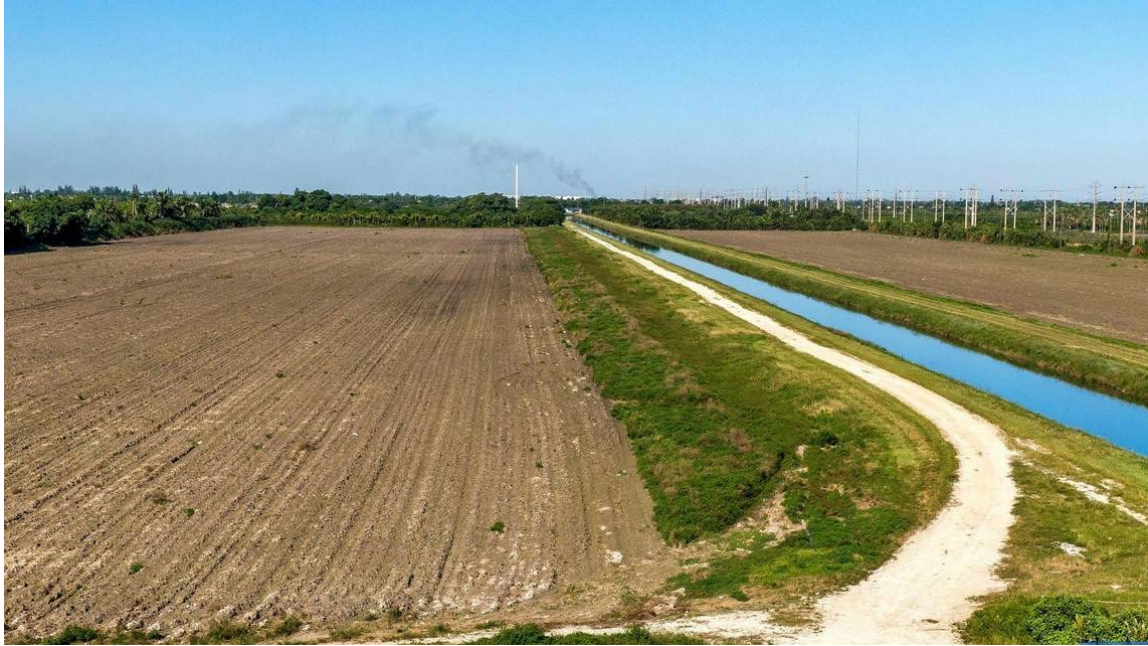
Last year, CRCP hired the University of Miami to gather information and begin drafting a management plan for the Coral ECA. As the Coral ECA is a DEP-managed area, the plan is based on a DEP Aquatic Preserve management plan template. It reviews the history of the ECA, the data collected via SEFCRI and other projects, and outlines issues, goals, objectives, and strategies to address the main issues in the Coral ECA. Many OFR projects are included in the strategies, and once the Fisheries Committee recommendations are complete, they will also be included.

5. Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary - Restoration Blueprint

Outside of the Kristin Jacobs Coral Reef Ecosystem Conservation Area, DEP and FWC are co-management representatives of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS). Both agencies have been working closely on the Sanctuary Advisory Council and Water Quality Protection Program, providing ongoing feedback and updates to FKNMS. More recently, DEP and FWC have committed to working with NOAA on the update of the FKNMS regulations, management plan (Restoration Blueprint), and associated management agreements.

Miami-Dade commission delays UDB vote again. Developers win more time to make case

BY DOUGLAS BANKS



View of a farm field at 26100 SW 112th Ave. that is included in a plan to expand the Urban Development Boundary by converting farmland into a 9 million-square-foot industrial park in South Miami-Dade County, off Florida's Turnpike. PEDRO PORTAL pportal@miamiherald.com

Miami-Dade County commissioners again postponed a final vote on [expanding the Urban Development Boundary](#) for an 800-acre industrial complex on farmland near Biscayne Bay, as developers maneuvered Wednesday to secure the needed political support for a change environmental groups are fighting.

This was the second deferral developers secured in two weeks, after a May 19 meeting where they failed to win the nine commission votes needed to move the line that serves as a boundary separating rural areas from more intense development.

The proposal is for a 9 million-square-foot warehouse and industrial complex south of Florida's Turnpike and north of Moody Drive.

At the request of Jeffrey Bercow, lawyer and lobbyist for developers Aligned Real Estate Holdings and Coral Rock Development, commissioners agreed to hold a final vote on the project on Sept. 22. Commissioners will be free to make the decision without another round of public remarks on the project, since the board already heard two hours of required comments at the May meeting.

It's a project that backers say will bring a vital employment center to the commuting residents of South Miami-Dade. It would go up on farmland that county planners say is too vulnerable to coastal flooding and the state environmental agency says could be important for Everglades restoration.

The commission last moved the Urban Development Boundary (UDB) in 2013, and this proposal by developers sparked the first big environmental fight since Mayor Daniella Levine Cava took office in the fall of 2020. She has vowed to veto a commission vote in favor of the project, complicating the path to approval for developers.

Not only do they need nine votes to comply with the county charter requirement that two-thirds of the commission approve an expansion of the UDB, but they also would need a two-thirds vote at the next commission meeting to override the promised veto.

Two weeks ago, developers faced a setback when the commission took a vote to reject the application outright. That vote failed on a 5-7 vote, but the tally revealed for the first time that there wasn't enough support on the board to deliver the nine votes needed to expand the UDB.

Voting against the project on May 19 were Commissioners René Garcia, Danielle Cohen Higgins, Eileen Higgins, Jean Monestime and Raquel Regalado. Sally Heyman did not attend the meeting.

Wednesday's deferral vote didn't advance to a debate about the project itself.

"If we really are concerned about the environment and the final outcome, I think we have to give applicants as much time as possible to state their case," Regalado said before voting for the deferral. "If we don't want to move the line, we don't move the line."

The plan for a deferral was in place as the meeting began after two weeks of lobbying from developers and environmental groups that Heyman described as leaving her "inundated" with requests for meetings. Chairman Jose "Pepe" Diaz said it was his understanding a delay had been requested. He then called on Bercow, who had already made his way to the microphone reserved for public comment.

Bercow said developers had a complicated agreement related to wages at a project touting more than 11,000 new jobs that needed more time for back-and-forth with county lawyers.

"It has taken more time than expected," Bercow said.

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article262017987.html>

Leonard Abess says he'd make \$100M off a rural Miami development. Why fight it?

BY DOUGLAS BANKS AND ALEX HARRIS



Leonard Abess Jr., who owns about 160 acres of a proposed 800-acre industrial complex developers proposed as part of a request to extend Miami-Dade County's Urban Development Boundary, spoke out against the application during a commission meeting. BY MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Billionaire landowner Leonard Abess Jr. estimates a \$100 million windfall awaits if Miami-Dade County commissioners approve an 800-acre industrial project that includes about 160 acres of farmland he's been buying up over the last decade outside of the Urban Development Boundary.

Abess, 73, insists he doesn't want the money, calling the proposed South Dade Logistics and Technology warehouse and office complex a "fraud" that would pave over "some of the best land in America."

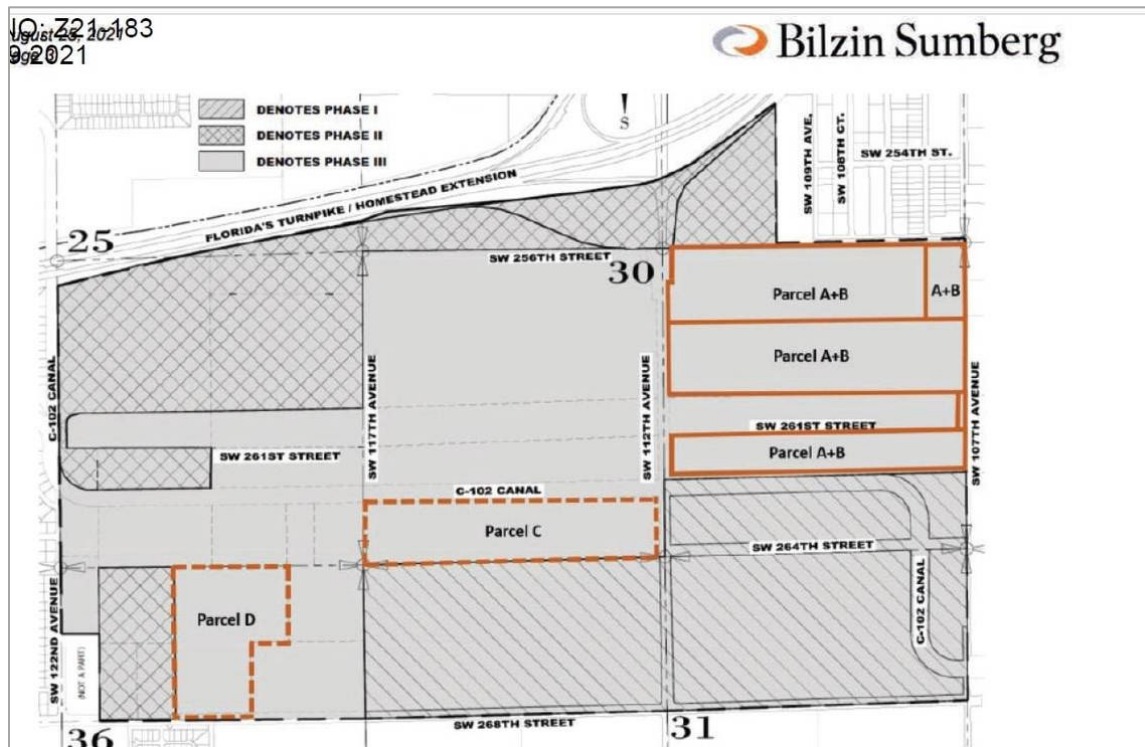
"There is no profit if you lose your soul," the 73-year-old retired banker told commissioners during a surprise appearance May 19 after a public hearing had ended on the proposed development. "We are not in alignment with this development one bit. ... My family considers it one of the biggest frauds on this community. The big lie in our community. And a con game."

It was a made-for-TV moment from a mogul who has kept a low profile since a flash of global fame 13 years ago for sharing millions of dollars with employees when he sold his family's bank for \$945 million.

"I have never seen anything like this in 34 years," said Commissioner Rebeca Sosa, asking for rebuttal time from the developers for the project off of the Florida Turnpike and north of Moody Drive. Knowing they didn't have the votes that day, developers Aligned Real Estate Holdings and Coral Rock Development won a two-week delay on the final decision until Wednesday, June 1.

Though he and his wife, Jayne, gave \$5 million endowing the University of Miami's ecology center, environmental groups couldn't count on Abess opposing the project.

In August, Abess' lawyers filed a zoning application to allow industrial construction on his farmland within the project site — documents that included plans for a dozen warehouses and office buildings and parking lots for more than 2,000 vehicles.



In a filing with Miami-Dade County, lawyers for Leonard Abess Jr. holding companies under the Archimedes name show where Abess owns property (Parcels A through D) within the proposed South Dade Logistics and Technology District, an 800-acre complex proposed outside the existing Urban Development Boundary. Abess issued a scathing denunciation of the project at a May 19, 2022, meeting of the County Commission, saying he did not support the land-use changes that include his 160 acres of properties. Miami-Dade County

“He told me to my face he would not object to the application,” Brian May, a lobbyist for the developers, said of two meetings he had with Abess after the initial proposal was filed in May 2021. “Honestly, what he did on May 19 was a complete blindside to the applicants.”

Abess' lawyers put the zoning application on hold in November, citing “concerns” by regulatory agencies as the project faced warnings from Florida's Department of Environmental Protection that construction on the land could harm Everglades restoration. The suspension of the Abess zoning request cheered opponents of the project, but let developers point out an industrial application still exists for all 160 acres of farmland in question.

The Abess speech gave a voice to a main objection from county planners, who recommended commissioners reject the project in part because of the developers' patchy control of a site that's roughly the size of Key Biscayne. Land owners accounting for about 370 acres agreed to be part of the first two phases of construction. The remaining 423 acres that are part of the third phase of development belong to owners like Abess who haven't signed onto the project with active zoning applications to allow industrial construction on their land.

In fact, the developers need a change in county policy that currently requires zoning applications for all land proposed to be brought within the UDB.

While it's billed as being built last, the Phase 3 parcels cut the full project site in half, meaning the second cluster of warehouses would go up on the side farthest from the Florida Turnpike, a sequence county planners said would constitute sprawl.

In an economic analysis developers filed in August, a consultant assigned about 4,100 of the projected 11,400 permanent jobs to Phase III. With Abess owning 50% of the Phase III lands according to developers, that would mean roughly 2,000 of the promised jobs come from land owned by someone opposing the project.

"It is uncertain when and if Phase III will develop," county staff wrote in a May 12 report. "Therefore, the economic impacts from Phase III are tentative at best."

Abess did not respond to multiple interview requests, and declined to answer questions after the meeting.

HOW ABESS BECAME A KEY RURAL LANDLORD

Abess holding companies [began purchasing the land included in the South Dade application](#) in the years after his 2008 sale of his majority stake in Miami's City National Bank for \$945 million. Leonard Abess Sr. founded the bank in the 1940s. It was sold decades later, then his son gained control again through a series of deals in the 1980s.

Abess' own sale of City National brought him global attention for sharing \$60 million of the profits with current and former City National employees. President Barack Obama mentioned Abess in his 2009 inaugural address during the depths of the financial crisis, [citing him as an example](#) that "hope is found in unlikely places."

Abess was already one of Miami's wealthiest residents when he sold City Bank, having paid \$16 million to [Sylvester Stallone for an estate](#) next to the Vizcaya mansion in 1999. In 2017, [Bloomberg estimated Abess was worth](#) about \$1.3 billion.

In his comments to commissioners, Abess said he considers himself the largest individual land owner in Miami-Dade, with more than 1,700 acres of farmland south of Kendall Drive. Abess [is using some of his farmland to grow limes](#) in an effort to revive that as a Miami-Dade citrus crop.

He's also sold some agricultural land for housing development. An Abess entity, [BAAAMA IX](#), in 2020 was part of a zoning application to let Lennar build apartments and homes on 45 acres inside the UDB and a quarter of a mile from U.S. 1. The assemblage off of Southwest 232nd Street included 15 acres of Abess agricultural land.

In 2021, the BAAAMA entities sold the property to a development firm for \$5 million, according to county property records.

On May 19, Abess told commissioners he stood to make \$100 million if the South Dade Logistics upzoning went through and his farmland was brought inside the Urban Development Boundary. While he's fighting the project, longtime farmers Peter and Ann Robau wrote commissioners over the weekend urging them to clear the way for their acreage to be part of the development rather than stuck in "a declining farming business on the land in perpetuity."

Citing soil challenges from rising seas, scarce farm labor in Miami-Dade and a younger generation turning its back on farming across the county, the Robaus said it's time to convert the land to a place that will grow jobs.

"The idea that farming is a sustainable business for our land over the long-term is simply not true," the Robaus wrote in a May 28 letter, "and is not an honest assessment from people who do not actually live in the area and work here every day."

MEETINGS WITH DEVELOPERS – AND ACTIVISTS

Publicly, the Abess position on the South Dade project remained unknown as the May 19 vote approached.

On the day of the vote, the developer team arrived early to save spots in the commission chambers and noted an oddity: eight chairs taped off with printed signs stating "Reserved Seating District 8."

Abess, accompanied by family members and staff, occupied the seats as the meeting got going, but never rose to speak during the two-hour public hearing where attendees were each given 60 seconds to speak. Only once board members began their debate did the District 8 commissioner, project opponent Danielle Cohen Higgins, call Abess to the microphone.

"I thought it was valuable for the board and our community to hear from a landowner who is so vehemently opposed" to the project, Cohen Higgins said in an interview after the meeting. "I thought his voice was a powerful one."

Abess objected to developers brushing off the land as not valuable to Miami-Dade's agricultural industry, saying farmers working for him grow corn and green beans there. He also suggested it was misleading to put forth a project that includes his land as part of the job-engine promised South Dade by the developers.

"The speculators, developers, lobbyists and lawyers have called me 'Phase Three,' he said. "I do not accept that designation."

May said Abess lawyers have been in frequent contact with the legal team for the South Dade Logistics project. Developers, he said, had no reason to believe they'd be faced with a property owner launching a public attack on the project at the last minute.

"If he would have told us upfront that he was opposed to this, that he viewed this as something as he could not live with," May said, "I'm not sure we would have filed the application."

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article261749582.html>

Thank you again for your strong partnership and collaboration on the initiatives listed above. They are all important steps towards a comprehensive coral reef conservation strategy. As these and new initiatives progress, we look forward to continuing to work with the RPCs to restore, protect and enhance Florida's Coral Reef.

Sincerely,



Shawn Hamilton, DEP Secretary



Eric Sutton, FWC Executive Director

Cc: Honorable Ron DeSantis, Governor
Commissioner Rodney Barreto, Chair, FWC
Thomas Reinert, Regional Director, FWC South Region
Joanna C. Walczak, Administrator, DEP Coral Protection and Restoration Program
Jason Andreotta, Director, DEP Southeast District
Jamie Monty, Southeast Regional Administrator, DEP Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection
Jessica McCawley, Director, FWC Division of Marine Fisheries
Isabel Cosio Carballo, SFRPC Executive Director
Thomas Lanahan, TCRPC Executive Director